

ART. V.—*Note on the Customs connected with the use of
the so-called Kūrdaitcha Shoes of Central Australia.*

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(Communicated by PROFESSOR SPENCER).

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The following notes were written in 1892 in response to the request of a correspondent, and are the result of careful inquiries conducted amongst the blacks in the Charlotte Waters district. As they have been gathered at first hand and are somewhat more detailed than any yet published, it has been suggested to me that it would be worth while placing them on record.

I have been for many years well acquainted with the natives of this district, but owing to the fact that it is now more than twenty years since the custom was practised, considerable care has to be taken in order to secure authentic information. Any blackfellow will give the inquirer replies to his questions, but it is only after making a great number of inquiries and obtaining corroboration from various sources that it is possible to arrive at a conclusion as to what is and what is not reliable information.

There are in this district only two old men who have ever worn the shoes themselves; the younger men only know of the custom from the elders of the tribe, and in a few years it will probably be forgotten. The shoes are now only made to supply the orders of the whites, or perhaps to enable the old men to illustrate the deeds of other days before the half-admiring, half-sceptical members of the younger generation.

The shoes themselves have been previously described. They consist of a sole made of human hair and a great number of intertwined emu feathers, a certain amount of human blood being used as a kind of cementing material. The whole form a large pad, flat above and convex below, with the two ends rounded off so that there is no distinction between them. The upper part is in the form of a net, made of human hair, with a central opening for the foot, across which stretches a cord of hair which serves as a strap for the instep.

The shoes themselves in this district are known by the name of "Urtathurta," and the occasion on which they were used is spoken of as "Kūrdaitcha lūma" (Kūrdaitcha—a bad or evil spirit, and lūma, to walk).

The wearing of the Urtathurta and going Kūrdaitcha lūma appears to have been the medium for a form of vendetta, though it was quite distinct from the "Adninga" or war party which was always despatched to avenge the death of a native supposed to have been killed by spells or to recover a lubra who had been stolen.

When any native threatened the life of a member of a different tribe, the threatened man could await his enemy's attack or take the initiative himself. If he decided upon the latter course the medicine man was consulted and a "Kūrdaitcha lūma" arranged. In either case the attacking native was called Kūrdaitcha. A medicine man always accompanied the latter, and both were similarly attired.

The head-dress worn consisted of a bunch of feathers in front and a bundle of green leaves behind. As a disguise the face was blackened with charcoal, the whiskers tied back behind the neck, and a broad white stripe of powdered gypsum was drawn from the top of the forehead down the nose to the bottom of the chin, while a similar stripe extended across the chest from shoulder to shoulder.

A girdle made from the hair cut from the head of a blackfellow after death was worn round the waist. This special form of hair girdle is supposed to serve the double purpose of increasing the strength of the wearer, his courage, and the accuracy of his aim—it embodied, in fact, all the warlike attributes of the dead warrior—and at the same time it produced inaccuracy of aim in the enemy.

Ordinary hair-string was worn round the legs for the purpose, as the blacks say, of protecting them against snake-bite.

Both medicine man and Kūrdaitcha carried a sacred stone, the possession of which is supposed to be even more efficacious than that of the hair girdle.

In addition, the medicine man carried in his girdle a live lizard.

On leaving his camp the Kūrdaitcha walked in front, followed at a short distance by the medicine man, both armed with spears,

and carrying the Urtathurta, or shoes. When hidden from view of the camp they put on the shoes, and proceeded towards the enemy's camp. The Kūrdaitcha always led the way, and every precaution was taken to prevent their advance being seen. On arriving at the camp the Kūrdaitcha crept forward alone, holding the sacred stone between his teeth, and (if successful) speared his enemy dead. The medicine man then came up and inserted the head of the lizard which he carried into the wound. The lizard was supposed to drink up the blood, and so to remove evidence of the manner in which the deed had been done. Sometimes the wound was seared to prevent its being recognised as a spear wound. Almost invariably the attack was made at night and, when successful, the Kūrdaitcha and medicine man started back at once, halting some distance from their camp to remove and conceal the shoes before going in. If by chance the tracks of the Kūrdaitcha were seen they were avoided, and the threatened camp merely kept on the alert. If the Kūrdaitcha himself were seen in the vicinity of the camp he was at once attacked and, if possible, killed. The medicine man who accompanied him was, in all cases, allowed to return uninjured to his camp.

When the body of a man murdered by a Kūrdaitcha was discovered no attempt was made to track the latter, but the medicine man immediately appointed a relative of the murdered man or, failing a relative, one of the same group (a Kūmarra if he were a Kūmarra or a Panunga if he were a Panunga, etc.) to avenge him. This was done by going as a Kūrdaitcha in the way described. If the Kūrdaitcha were unable to find the particular man he wanted he would spear a man belonging to the same tribe, but this seems to have been of rare occurrence.

Immediately a Kūrdaitcha was seen near a camp the man who detected him informed the others of the fact by saying, "Udnurrah pitchimi" (Udnurrah, a wild dog; pitchimi, is coming). He did not mention the word Kūrdaitcha, but his meaning was understood and preparations were made for an attack on the Udnurrah. In this connection one of the head men of the tribe informed me that, when a blackfellow reported "Udnurrah pitchimi" the medicine man could appoint a Kūrdaitcha who had the power of accosting the other Kūrdaitcha and of compelling him to return to his camp, but I have been

unable to fully corroborate this, though it seems possible that, when the custom prevailed to an abnormal extent, such a course was adopted to prevent excessive bloodshed.

It is usually stated that the object of the curious shape of the shoes was to prevent the tracks of the Kūrdaitcha from being recognised. This may have been the case to a certain extent, but at the same time it must be remembered that in certain respects the blacks have a very powerful imagination, and their idea of not being able to track a Kūrdaitcha is very possibly an example of this. There is practically little doubt but that if a blackfellow really tried to track a Kūrdaitcha he would do so well enough—a stick or a stone turned out of the way or the nature of the impress of the rounded sole in sand would be quite sufficient clue to an expert tracker, such as these natives are, to show him the direction in which the Kūrdaitcha had passed. Most probably it is, one might call it, an article of faith that a Kūrdaitcha cannot be tracked. There is something mysterious about him—he wears the sacred stone and hair girdle which are supposed to give him special powers ; the carrying of a sacred stone when fighting is even supposed to make a man invisible to his enemies, and he commits the deed under the cover of darkness.

It would probably be more correct to say, not that the wearing of the shoes makes it impossible to track the Kūrdaitcha, but that the blacks make themselves believe that it does so.